

"Completely Reliable"

Text: 2 Peter 1:16-21

Putting aside all pretense and hypocrisy, may you come face to face with your God here this morning and, confessing your sins, stand before him confident in the righteousness of his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the full and complete forgiveness of sins that he won for you. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

The 17th Century English philosopher/historian William Godwin wrote: "What magic is there in the pronoun "my" to overturn the decisions of everlasting truth?" Do you follow the sense of what he was asking? What power does that little word "my" possess that it changes or perverts our acceptance even of undeniable, objective truth? It is a universal human trait that if something is "mine," it is instantly more valuable and believable. You've all probably heard parents defend the evil actions of their own children. Why? Because they are *their* children. Those same parents would never even consider trying to defend those same actions if committed by someone else's child. Ted Bundy's mother defended her dear, sweet, innocent boy until the day she died. The fact that something is "mine" changes us. It makes it infinitely harder to be objective and to accept the truth, even when it is obvious.

Little, everyday examples are all around us, proving on a daily basis that no one is immune. Two fans of rival football teams see exactly the same play, and replay, and it is no coincidence that both are convinced the right call is the one that benefits *their* team. Two citizens see a governor or president do or say the same thing, but for one it is bad, evil, and stupid, and for the other good, righteous, and smart – depending only on whether his politics agree with *mine*. Have you ever watched a war movie and cringed when Americans are killed and inwardly cheer when the bad guys are mowed down? Why? Because it's *my* country and *my* side.

So what do we do with this information, this truth about ourselves? We acknowledge it, and make an ongoing and concerted effort to minimize the damage – and the greatest damage in this life is always in connection with spiritual things. We absolutely cannot afford to allow "my" to cloud our understanding of the truth of God's Word. In other words, one of our most fervent prayers to our Creator God ought to be to strip each of us of the pride of "my" when we approach God's Word. Sentiments like "I just think..." "I feel..." and "It just seems to me..." are irrelevant in the study of God's Word. The only thing that we ought to be concerned with when we

read our Bibles is "What does God say?" Like the young prophet-in-training, Samuel, we are to approach our God with a simple, "**Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.**"

It is from this perspective that we approach and hear our text from God's Word this morning. That Word of God that will dictate our truth, our reality, is recorded in Peter's Second Epistle, the First Chapter.

ESV(2 Peter 1:16-21) For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

This is God's Word – pure, divine, objective truth. What a joy and privilege for mere mortals to be able to read and study the very words of God, and to have our own opinions guided by the Holy Spirit himself. That our God would so guide each of us this morning, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!**" Amen.

Do you ever grow weary of those who always seem to feel the need to warn you about pretty much everything? I'm guessing I would probably fit into that category, since part of your expectation of me is to bring you the full counsel of God's Word, and God's Word identifies threats in almost every aspect of life in a sin-broken world. We're not talking about tinfoil hat stuff here; we're talking about real threats that God himself brings to our attention, many of which are anything but obvious.

So buckle up, because I need to bring yet another warning to your attention – a threat that is anything but obvious: a potential problem with your prayers, and the inherent dangers of prayer itself.

We've talked before about how interconnected the Word of God is, and how focusing on one part of God's Word while ignoring another is always profoundly dangerous. I'm sure you've all probably heard those

who, claiming to be Christian, try to justify their desire to seek revenge based on the fact that "The Good Book says, 'Eye for an eye' and 'Tooth for a tooth.'" It does, but only as part of the civil law that God gave to Old Testament Israel, and even then he did not give that power to individuals but to their governing officials. All Jewish civil (and ceremonial) laws ended at the coming of Jesus, and those who try to justify their thirst for vengeance are ignoring Jesus' own command not to seek revenge.

So how can this apply to prayer? What possible danger could prayer pose to God's children? The problem, the danger, presents itself when we again focus on one aspect of God's Word (in this case his invitation to pray) to the exclusion of another. Some dangers might be obvious here, others not so much. James, for example, warns us against praying doubtfully: ***If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.*** ^{ESV}(James 1:5-7) James also warned against praying selfishly for those things that serve only our dishonorable desires and passions: ***You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*** ^{ESV}(James 4:2-3)

But there is another less obvious problem that seems to be gaining popularity among even devout Christians: praying for divine guidance where God has already offered direction, or for answers to questions when God has already provided those answers in his Word. Remember, God's Word never conflicts with or contradicts itself. The growing problem in this case is that the Bible also teaches (mercifully as it turns out) that there would be no such thing as divine, immediate revelation after the Apostolic period and the writing of the New Testament. God certainly speaks to us today, but he speaks to us through the written words of our Bibles. This is first of all one of God's great, though largely unheralded, mercies. Ask anyone who professes a faith that allows, even expects, immediate and continuing revelation. They are never sure what to believe from one day to the next. They are also in far greater danger of the destructive power of that "my" problem we talked about earlier. What they *want* to be true (the "my" component) becomes "God's answer to prayer."

A couple of examples will help to clarify the problem and danger. A Christian couple decides to move in together, and to act in a way that God in his Word clearly reserved only for those who are married. They are counselled by Christian friends, family, and their pastor that what they are doing is sinful. Their response: "We've been praying about this, and we

are convinced that God approves of what we are doing because he would want us to be happy." You can easily identify the problem in this case, but *they* can't – because their judgment is distorted by that all-powerful "my." What they feel, think, desire all works to cloud their acceptance of God's clear and unambiguous truth. Yet even *our* judgment can be impaired if it happens to be our child. The fact – the truth – is that God has given clear direction in His Word, and would never contradict that perfect counsel, by any means, and certainly not through direct, divine revelation.

Another example. A young couple is dating and they make plans to be married. They agree they should be members of the same church, and that one of them must therefore must leave their church (which they believe the Word of God is taught correctly) and join the other's church (which teaches error.) This is what they do, and the reason, the justification, is again that "*they prayed about it.*"

Same problem, same result. Prayer is never meant to serve as a substitute for what God has told us in his Word. Prayer, in this context, is completely unreliable – not because God cannot be trusted, but because we tend to supply our own answers, only imagining that God is the source. In fact where God has commanded or forbidden something in his Word, it is a sinful act of rebellion to pray for further direction – to essentially ask him in prayer to contradict himself. It is obviously good and right to pray "*Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven,*" but that holy will of his is revealed to us only in our Bibles, not in the answers we only imagine he gives us in our subjective, me-centered prayers.

This is one way in which our text for this morning serves us so well, one way that it serves as part of that "***lamp shining in a dark place.***" If ever there was a man who could claim to speak with authority, it was the Apostle Peter. Peter was not only with Jesus his entire earthly ministry, he was part of Jesus' innermost circle. There was a ring of disciples, and inside of that a ring of Apostles, and inside of that the three men he took everywhere: James, John, and *Peter*. These three men saw and heard things that not even the other Apostles were privileged to witness. He kept these three the closest in those terrible hours in the Garden of Gethsemane. They alone saw him raise Tabitha from the dead. Only they were privileged to witness Jesus' transfiguration.

This is the event Peter referred to in our text: ***For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power***

and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ **For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"** ¹⁸ **we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.** Clearly a truly awesome event and an incredible privilege to be one of the three human beings allowed to see Jesus' radiant glory prior to heaven. Again, if it were ever appropriate to seek truth from a human source, it would be hard to deny that the Apostle Peter would be a most reliable source. And yet in the very next verse of our text, where did Peter direct us? To the Word of God, which he described as **"the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place."**

Not only are our Bibles our *most* reliable source for God's perfect will in our lives, they are our *only* completely reliable source. Peter went on in our text to explain how and why: **"Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation.** ²¹ **For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."** What he here *confirmed* is the perfect reliability of God's Word. What he *warned against* is the very problem we are confronting this morning: **"someone's own interpretation"** – the very things to which misguided, already-answered prayers can leave us susceptible. There is no need to pray for guidance when God has already counselled us in his Word. There is, in fact, great danger in doing so. Peter alluded to that danger earlier in this same chapter when by inspiration he wrote: **He has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.** Our natural desires can taint our prayers, but they cannot taint God's Word. The Holy Spirit speaking through Paul confirmed both the power and the completeness of our Bibles when he wrote: **All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,** ¹⁷ **that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.** ^{ESV} (2 Timothy. 3:16-17)

Prayer is obviously both a tremendous blessing and a humbling privilege. The ability to speak directly to our God, together with his promise to hear and answer, is truly awesome. That privilege is ours because Jesus won it for us by removing the barrier that had separated us from our God, our sin. This he did on the cross. Our sins have been erased, paid, forgotten by the only One that matters. Forgiveness and salvation are ours through faith alone in Jesus Christ. It is to that fact that our God directs us for our

comfort, peace, and assurance – all revealed to us in his Word. Pray that God the Holy Spirit would guide and direct your lives, but then find that direction and guidance where God himself told you it could be found. Not in your thoughts or wishes. Not in what you think or feel. Not even in your prayers. In his perfect, holy, all-sufficient, *completely reliable* Word. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Acts 17:16-23, 31** Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbling wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"--because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. ²² ¶ So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you... ³¹ (God) has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

^{ESV} **John 14:15-21** "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ ¶ "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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The Fifth Sunday after Easter – May 17, 2020

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 23 (Stanzas 1-3) (Red Hymnal)

"Hallelujah, Let Praises Ring"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Acts 17:16-23, 31) Our first Scripture reading this morning reminds us of how "provoked" the Apostle Paul was by the evil and idolatry he witnessed in the ancient city of Athens. We should be no less provoked and grieved by what we see all around us in our day – including the evil we see in our own lives. We are reminded in this lesson how Paul refused to compromise with the evil of his day, but boldly met it head-on with the truth of God's Word. That Word of God remains our only sure and effective weapon today.

Psalm 84 (Supplement page 38) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (John 14:15-21) Jesus here talks about the sending of the Holy Spirit following his Ascension (the event we commemorate on Thursday of this week). That event we know today as Pentecost. We enjoy the benefits of Pentecost still today. Having brought the new man to life in us, the Holy Spirit now lives within us. The natural result is the fruits of faith (or good works) in our lives. The greatest benefit of Pentecost is the increased understanding of God's Word and will in our lives. This morning this lesson is meant to re-emphasize our appreciation both for the Word of God itself, and for our God-given ability to know and believe that Word.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 288 (Red Hymnal)

"Lord, Help Us Ever to Retain"

The Sermon – Text: 2 Peter 1:16-21 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Completely Reliable"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 290 (Red Hymnal)

"We Have a Sure Prophetic Word"

The Prayers followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Closing Hymn – 23 (Stanza 4) (Red Hymnal)

"Hallelujah, Let Praises Ring"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (26) Average (40)

This Week at St. Paul:

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| Today | -10:00 a.m. | – Worship Service |
| | -11:00 a.m. | – Fellowship Hour |
| | -11:15 a.m. | – Church Council Meeting |
| Wednesday | -6:00 p.m. | – Confirmation Suspended |
| | -7:00 p.m. | – Bible Class Suspended |
| Next Sunday | -10:00 a.m. | – Worship Service |
| | -11:00 a.m. | – Fellowship Hour |

CLC News – Pastor Michael Gurath has returned the call to St Luke's of Lemmon. Teacher Neil Bernthal is considering the call to Immanuel of Mankato to serve as high school math and science teacher. Teacher Dan Barthels is considering the call to Redeemer of Cheyenne, WY. Teacher Quinn Sprengeler is considering the call to Holy Trinity of West Columbia. Pastor-elect Cory Drehle is scheduled to be ordained and installed as pastor of Berea of Sioux Falls on Sunday, June 14th.

Public Meeting Procedures – Please continue to observe prudent precautions during our services, including spreading out in the pews, touching as few things as possible, and spacing yourselves if you wish to visit after church. Food and beverage service will remain suspended for the time being.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet during the fellowship hour this morning. One agenda item is if, when, and how to resume the celebration of Holy Communion here at St Paul. Please don't hesitate to share your thoughts or opinions on this with a Church Council member prior to the Church Council meeting this morning. Also a reminder that private communion is always available by appointment with the Pastor.

Confirmation – Confirmation parents are asked to meet with the Pastor after the service this morning.